

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 554

CE 056 200

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TITLE Evaluating the Curriculum--The Excellence Aspect: A Practical Guide for Section Heads and Course Leaders. Information Bank Working Paper Number 2583.
INSTITUTION Further Education Staff Coll., Blagdon (England).
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Continuing Education; *Course Evaluation; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Evaluation; *Evaluation Methods; *Excellence in Education; Foreign Countries; Postsecondary Education; Program Evaluation; Relevance (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

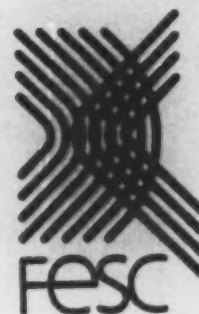
This paper presents a short outline for evaluating the curriculum of post-16 noncompulsory education in the United Kingdom. The first, introductory section establishes a rationale for curriculum evaluation. The second section discusses a manageable sequence events for curriculum evaluation. It points out that the curriculum should only offer courses that meet the needs of clients and posits the basic questions of curriculum evaluation: (1) How well are courses being run? (2) What is missing the courses being run? and (3) Are the right courses being run? The third section explains data collection, according to the work of R. E. Challis. It suggests collecting data under the headings of context, activities, and outcomes. The final section of the paper discusses converting curriculum evaluation into an improved curriculum and provides a framework diagram, taken from Elizabeth Whale's work for Birmingham Local Education Agency, for program evaluation and review. (KC)

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**Evaluating the curriculum—
the excellence aspect a
practical guide for section
heads and course leaders**

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August 1988

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The Further Education Staff College, 1988

WORKING PAPER

EVALUATING THE CURRICULUM

- THE EXCELLENCE ASPECT

- A practical guide for Section Head's and Course Leaders

Don Cook
Staff Tutor
Further Education Staff College

July 1988

INTRODUCTION

It is now more important than ever, that the curriculum offered by organisations concerned with non-compulsory post-sixteen education and training is evaluated; not only by performance indicators which measure aspects of the Efficiency, Economy and Effectiveness of the provision, but by an agreed and understood system, which offers assurance for the Excellence of the curriculum. Quality assurance for the products of the further and higher education system may become critical to their viability and even their survival. We are not the cheapest, but we are the best - could be a key to the future of the proud tradition of our LEA post-sixteen education and training provision. The only way we can support this statement is to establish a national system of quality provision, which is clearly understood and appreciated by the clients and customers. Of course, the Training Commission, NCVQ, BTEC, RSA, City and Guilds Institute and a host of other bodies would say that their activities are directed to this aim; however many in further and higher education would say that what is one offer from a college is more than even the most highly relevant job orientated qualification system and it is worth the cost; in time money and effort by the client.

The overall problem is how to provide the quality assurance required; and how to evaluate the curriculum. There is certainly a copious literature to give us the background and much of that published in the last ten years is very pertinent to our present situation.

There are a growing number of projects and initiatives which are, and will, produce more and more lists of evaluation activities and complicated diagrams which show the sequences of evaluation activities and how it all fits together. Getting to grips with this vast amount of information is just

one problem for the busy section or course leader, who is likely to bear the brunt of any curriculum evaluation process; at the level it is really required and where if effective, it will have most value to the 'organisation' and the FE/HE system. The rest of this paper is a personal simplified view, on how to go about curriculum evaluation. It has the advantages and all the disadvantages of a simplification. Its purpose is to encourage all those busy and very practical section heads and course leaders, who are the backbone of the FE/HE system, to have a go at evaluating the curriculum, if they are not already engaged in the activity. It is only by their efforts on a large scale, that we will get the body of experience of curriculum evaluation to make the Quality Assurance we can give to our provision, have the status it requires to make it a real force in the survival and growth of the FE/HE service.

A MANAGEABLE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

In evaluating the curriculum for its quality, let us start, as a section or course leader, with the courses which already exist. The basic question is do they achieve what they set out to do? To check this we evaluate the course process and products against the declared aims and objectives, for a defined set of students. We are most likely to do this for a course, but we may choose to do it for the components of a course or a group of courses within a defined vocational or other area. The practicalities of this evaluation are that we monitor the starting points, the student input; the educational/training process and the student output - their achievements and destinations.

The answers to our first set of questions will lead us in two directions. Firstly if our evaluation shows a successful course, it is still likely that it is not reaching all the clients who could benefit from it and exploring this issue will tell us whether this is because potential clients are not aware of the course,

a situation which can be remedied by more efficient dissemination of information about the course(s): marketing and publicity. The answers may also reveal that there is limited accessibility to the course(s), which can be remedied by timing, venues, entry requirements and modes of delivery. The second direction that our evaluation of existing courses may take us to is a realisation that what is currently offered is unsuitable and not wanted; the present curriculum we offer is just not valid. These are hard answers to face, but face them we must and this alone justifies evaluation in the situation which we now operate.

But remember, if the evaluation reveals that a course is no longer required it does not mean that the products or the process are necessarily in question; the focus is on wider and fundamental issues of relevance. Wisely managed this situation need not be an affront to the teacher, but is a challenge to the course and section leader. This can be demonstrated by referring to one line of enquiry that might develop from answers to evaluation, which demonstrate that a course is no longer apparently valid; by considering the relationship of student success to employment prospects. The solution to the non-validity might be employer training as well as, or instead of, course re-structuring.

To summarise this section; We can no longer justify offering courses that are not wanted. It is a basic obligation to offer the curriculum provision which meets the needs of clients. The only way to achieve this in the dynamic situation we will continue to exist in, is to build curriculum evaluation into our managerial activities. This will also provide "Quality Assurance" to clients and thus justify the cost of our services. The basic questions of curriculum evaluation are:-

How well are courses being run?

Who is missing from the courses we are running?

Are we running the right courses?

My definition of a course is any organised learning experience, that has been defined as to who it is for and what it is supposed to achieve.

The manageable sequence of events that we must progress through to evaluate the curriculum is:-

What data/information do we collect?

How do we present, organise and analyse it?

What is the effective organisational structure which will convert curriculum evaluation activities into providing an optimum curriculum - effective, economic, efficient and EXCELLENT?

WHAT DATA/INFORMATION DO WE COLLECT

There exists a growing number of lists of the information which contributes to curriculum evaluation and the tools by which this information is provided, eg meetings, committees and questionnaires.

The critical point for the section and courses leader, is that whatever is done is manageable and means something; progress into curriculum evaluation to a degree and at a rate that means something to you and your colleagues.

The following framework for evaluating the curriculum is based on the work of R E Challis and is written up in IB 1339. It has been developed by reference to a number of current initiatives in curriculum evaluation and the author's practical experience as a Head of Department, Moderator and Assessor.

Collect data/information under the headings of CONTEXT, ACTIVITIES and OUTCOMES.

THE CONTEXT - DATA AND INFORMATION

The context of the course is the relatively fixed categories of data which include:-

The syllabus, course content as agreed with a validating or examining body. The schemes of work and the agreed assignments, projects, assessment and marking schemes.

The role and activities of internal and external examining, assessing and moderating.

The students for whom a course is intended; pre-course qualifications, experience, aptitudes, abilities, interests, pre-course expectations and perhaps social background; age, sex and ethnic origin.

The organisers of the learning experience offered on the course(s): their qualifications, experience, status, approach to education and training, style of learning experience they offer.

The employers and employment (where relevant) for which the courses(s) are intended; education/training policies and attitudes, expectations, views on education. The work situation they offer and the nature of jobs available.

The environment in which the course(s) is conducted; classroom, workshop, laboratory; etc.; private study and library facilities, reprographics etc.; support services, e.g. technical and secretarial; counselling and career guidance; departmental and course organisation and administrative arrangements. Policies and requirements of validating body, college and LEA.

THE ACTIVITIES - DATA AND INFORMATION

The activities of a course are mainly interactions:-

Interactions between teacher and learner relating among other things to; classroom behaviour, the fundamental teaching learning experiences, how students work is marked, valued, discussed; the feed-back of information and opinion to students, subject and course counselling, the course meetings in which students participate. Interaction between teacher and teacher in casual conversations and in course meetings.

Interaction between student and student in group learning activities, helping each other with course work, in discussions about their course and during course related social activities etc..

Interaction between teacher and potential or actual employer and between student and potential or actual employer; consultations, negotiations on work placement, review and assessment of learning in the work place etc..

It is obviously also important to collect information on student activities not dealt with above; pattern of attendance, their choice where options exist, their work patterns, use of library and other private study facilities etc..

THE OUTCOMES - DATA AND INFORMATION

The outcomes are all the effects of a course(s) and include: student success and achievement within and beyond the examined and assessed requirements of a course; student attitude change; where students go to after the course and their divergence from expected destinations. The outcomes include the effect of the course on teachers, employers, the Section/Department and the institution.

The examples given within these categories of data and information are not exhaustive and it is obvious that the categories do not have hard boundaries. The categories and their sub-divisions are intended to provide a checklist for collecting and organising data and information.

Many staff in the FE system do not consider that a significant proportion of these areas of data/information contribute to course evaluation; it is the area of activities that is usually considered least value because of its high level of subjectivity.

However, the evaluators must continuously refer back to the three basic questions:-

How well are courses being run?

Who is missing from the courses we are running?

Are we running the right courses?

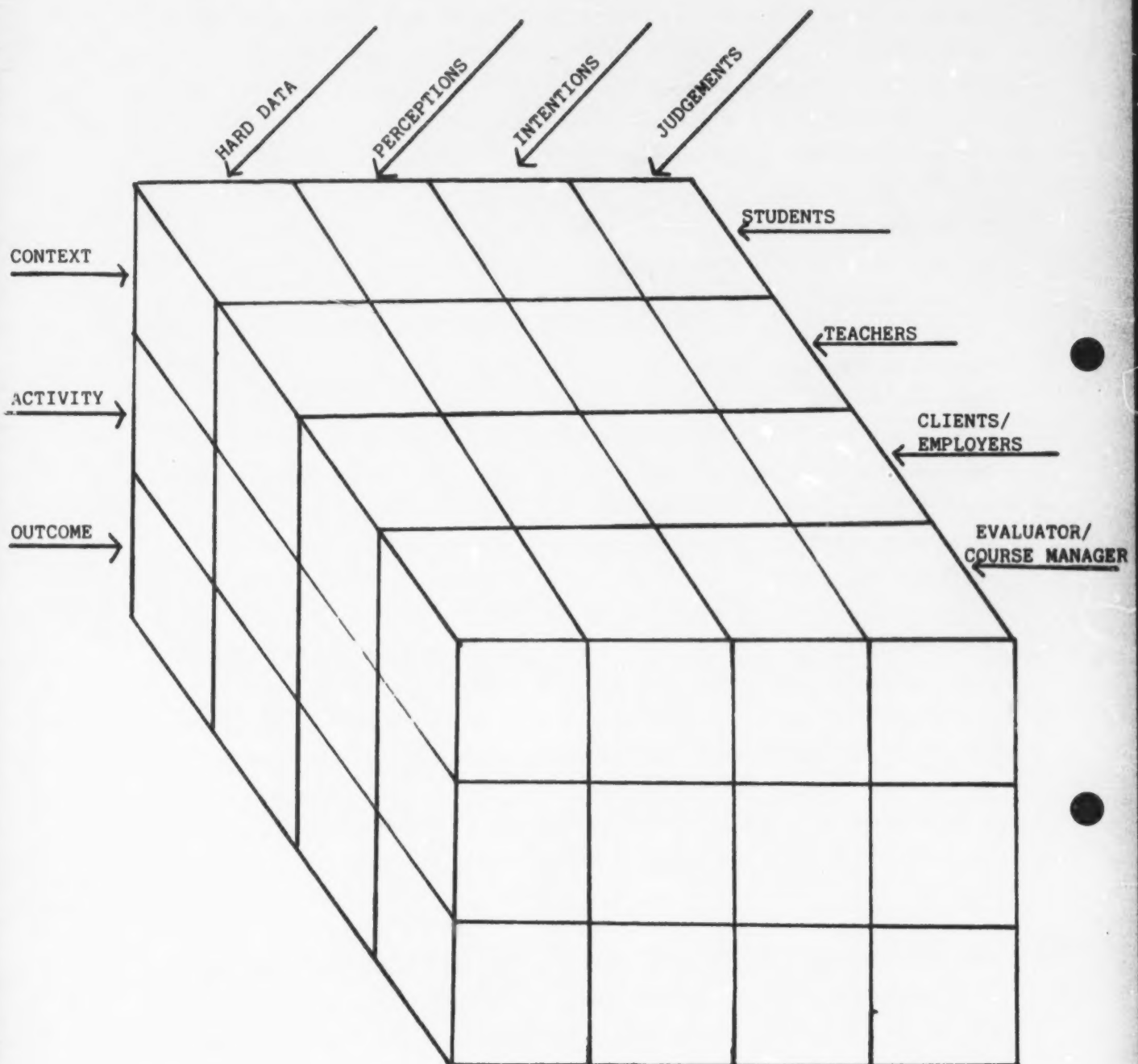
It is likely that some critical answers will come from the more subjective areas of questioning and it is an important part of the evaluation process to make this information credible.

Finally in this section how do we decide what to record under each of our areas of questioning and who makes this decision.

The record needs to be as concise as possible, whilst being totally honest, unambiguous, understandable to those outside any specialism being evaluated and the system must be available for inspection and verification.

My personal opinion is that the course or section leader, with a small group of acceptable selected or elected colleagues are capable of making professional judgements on all the areas of data and information required; using a framework agreed by the organisation verification group, which could be a college curriculum evaluation group, a sub-committee of the Academic Board, chaired by the Vice-Principal (Curriculum), or another suitable person chosen for good curriculum reasons.

This statement may seem like ducking the critical issue in curriculum evaluation, which is the quality of the information on which the quality of the provision is evaluated. However in the end it remains the decision of the organisation how it arranges this process and how it demonstrates its integrity.

ORGANISING AND ANALYSING DATA AND INFORMATION

If the format for collecting data and information previously outlined has been followed, the evaluator(s) will have collected it under a number of headings cross referenced as shown in the above diagram. Other headings may have been chosen, there is no intention for those given here to be prescriptive

Evaluators who attempt to pay equal attention to the information in each "box" are likely to fail in the evaluation task; either the data must be catalogued and weighted according to an agreed scheme, perhaps to give a scoring scheme which indicates "success" or "failure" and where strengths and weaknesses are, - or what is more easily manageable a means of focusing is required - to identify the critical issues.

Whatever we do, the section and course leader must maintain their managerial role and as such collect and evaluates data and information only if it leads to action. Aggregation of data tends to smooth out differences and produce an impression that all is reasonably satisfactory, whilst disaggregation tends to reveal differences and hence problems, leaving an impression that some things are not satisfactory - this is what the manager needs to know so that something can be done about it.

Work within the Responsive College Programme has dealt with a statistical interpretation of data to show problem areas that a manager can work on. This is introduced by Coombe Lodge Report Volume 20 Number 1; the second paper by Theodossin and Thompson. On-going work has taken this approach further. An introductory approach to curriculum problem identification by analysing the data and information collected by evaluation, without statistical interpretation, but by a logical judgmental process, is outlined as follows:-

Although it is satisfying to observe areas of harmony as revealed by evaluation, e.g. between students pre-course hopes for a course and the realisation of those hopes as the course is completed; it is the tensions and discrepancies revealed by evaluation, which have the real value in answering the questions asked at the beginning of this paper, which in turn lead us to improve the curriculum on offer - the purpose of curriculum evaluation.

Curriculum evaluation reveals different types of discrepancy.

- Discrepancies within one category of data (CONTEXT or ACTIVITIES or OUTCOMES). An example of this type would be a mis-match between a students pre-course expectations and the actual stated aims of the course - these are both within CONTEXT, and both observable by the evaluator alone.
- Discrepancies crossing the categories of data. An example of this type would be a mis-match between the abilities of a student (CONTEXT DATA) and the style of teaching (ACTIVITIES DATA), again both observable by the evaluator alone.
- A third type of discrepancy lies again within one category of data but involves differences between the evaluators observation and the perceptions of another interested party. An example of this within the ACTIVITIES area would be that an employer might wish students to concentrate on practical skills but the evaluator observes that most time is spent in lectures. This is a different type of discrepancy from the first category where the evaluator alone could observe a mis-match within one category of data. This type of discrepancy indicates the need for a three dimensional collection of data and information as shown in the diagram.
- The fourth type of discrepancy is that which lies between one group of participants and another in perceptions, intentions and judgements about a course. These types of discrepancy, causes for concern which require action, demonstrate the needs to collect a wide range of information, wider than is required for evaluating a course on say enrolment linked to examination success, if the process is to be evaluated properly. It is a personal opinion that we can only justify our cost to the student by the quality of the process we offer as well as the value of the outcome.

Once discrepancies have been identified and we have eliminated those that are not harmful, eg a healthy and productive dis-agreement between staff on the advantages and dis-advantages of particular classroom methods; the next stage is to select among the problems found those that are important - eliminating the trivial. If this is not done, the evaluators will still have too much to handle. Evaluation is critically linked to making decisions; action to improve the the curriculum. The selection as to which are trivial and which are important problems is linked to the options that are available.

Problem centred evaluation is not an informal and unstructured approach to evaluation. It should have the following characteristics:-

- The techniques of investigation are not fixed in advance but are appropriate to the problem, revealed by the discrepancy being investigated. The problem is not pre-defined but is revealed by the search for discrepancies.
- All perspectives of the problem are explored.
- As many interested parties as is reasonable are involved in the investigation and the decisions on remedies - how to improve the curriculum.

CONVERTING CURRICULUM EVALUATION INTO AN IMPROVED CURRICULUM

When the Education Reform Act, zero based budgeting and funds allocated to colleges largely on a basis of unit costs per student are a reality for all; evaluating the curriculum will be an essential and normal aspect of managing the curriculum. The evaluation at course, section or departmental level, will be part of the annual review process at institution and LEA levels and will be critical for the fund allocation cycle. Evaluating the curriculum for its quality is critical if we are to avoid a quality control system based totally on the accountancy model; our aim should be that the money is used to further improve the quality of provision because we can demonstrate that

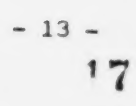
we are measuring quality. The model for quality control being developed for the Birmingham LEA by Elizabeth Whale and her colleagues (November 1987) demonstrates the benefits of the type of quality control this paper has been about, as an alternative to externally imposed accountancy based models. In Birmingham they have already re-designed whole courses after systematic evaluation by tutors and clients. In depth review made it possible to identify in detail which aspects needed to be changed and to redesign courses accordingly, in consultation with the funding agent.

The diagram on the following page makes obvious suggestions as to how the quality evaluation of courses would feed into the review process of the institution using information for a balanced programme of curriculum, institutional and staff development, the LEA using the review to revise its provision and funding.

A problem centred approach to curriculum evaluation, whilst it has advantages, hopefully as a focus for collective decision making to improve the curriculum, is based on problems, which although they will never be eliminated can be minimized by curriculum management that plans for programme evaluation and review as part of the design.

The final page of this paper is a framework diagram for programme evaluation and review, taken from Elizabeth Whale's work for Birmingham LEA. It provides a number of boxes in which to place the information required for evaluation and review. Having the right information available in all the boxes is a sound basis from which the efficient course evaluator can function.

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A FRAMEWORK FOR PROGRAMME EVALUATION AND REVIEW

FOCUS	Criteria for good practice	? (-gap-) issue	Current practice	Roles and responsibilities	Opportunities and constraints	Possible solutions	Resource implications	Setting Action Targets	When? Who?
Planning Management Co-ordination									
Access Entry Progression									
Programme Design									
Programme Delivery									
Programme Maintenance									
Programme Outcomes and Impact									

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